

Understanding the Communication Process

Communication Defined

Communication can be defined as the process by which individuals share information, ideas, views, feelings and attitudes. A key word in this definition is "share," which means to give or receive, or to enjoy or assume something in common. Some people use the term "send" rather than "share" when they define the communication process. However, "sending" merely implies transmitting a message with little concern for the person receiving it, while "sharing" implies that the source and the receiver are actively working together for common understanding.

You will also note that we call communication a *process*, which means that communication is ongoing and dynamic. It also means that it encompasses various components that interact with one another, causing specific consequences. For example, what information, ideas and attitudes are shared, how much is shared, when it is shared and what tools are used to share it are all variables in the process.

Types of Communication

Various types of communication exist. *Intrapersonal Communication* is concerned with the Self which is at the beginning and end of all communication. All the communication activities and processes relate, in fact, to those of intrapersonal communication, which addresses issues such as: who we are, how we come to be the kind of people we are, and why this matters in terms of making sense of communication. In *Interpersonal Communication*, two or more people talk to each other in close physical proximity. *Group Communication* describes a process whereby groups of people communicate with one another in a face-to-face encounter. In *Mass Communication*, professional communicators use a mass medium to communicate over distance to large and diversified audiences.

Communication Components

The communication process includes the following basic components: (a) the source, (b) the message, (c) the channel, and (d) the receiver.

The source (sometimes called the sender, communicator or encoder) is the person who shares information, ideas or attitudes with another person. In mass communication, the source is usually a professional communicator who shapes the message to be shared.

The message is whatever the source attempts to share with someone else. It originates with an idea, which then must be encoded into symbols that are used to express that idea. Symbols are words or objects that the source uses to elicit meaning in the mind of the receiver of the message. Words and pictures are the most common symbols used in communication. Words attempt to describe an object or concept, while pictures actually show a representation of the object or idea. If you were to give some friends directions on how to find your home, you might use words to identify the directions they should follow and the various cross streets that they need to look for. Or, if you preferred, you could draw a map.

The process of selecting symbols for an idea or object is a very important step in communication because poorly selected symbols will result in a confusing or misunderstood message. Care must be taken to choose symbols that will elicit responses in the mind of the message receiver that are similar to those intended by the source.

In selecting symbols for their messages, communicators must keep in mind that each person has a different *frame of reference* and that, as a result, certain symbols may mean different things to different people. A frame of reference (sometimes called field of experience) is the set of individual experiences; no two people have exactly the same experiences.

Each experience or event in our life leaves some sort of an impression on us, and we use the accumulation of these experiences to give meaning and interpretation to symbols. For example, a person who has been rescued by a police officer will respond differently from a criminal to the following message: "The police are coming." These different reactions are based on the meanings given to the word *police* that have been developed as a result of the individual's experience.

Although we primarily use words and pictures to send our messages, we also communicate in other ways. Facial expressions, gestures and body language can effectively send messages. For example, a television newscaster might be reporting on the outcome of a presidential election by stating only the facts about the vote, while his facial expressions and/or tone of voice reveal his biases against the winner.

The channel is the way in which we send our message. In interpersonal communication we use the senses of sight, sound and touch to communicate messages. In mass communication such technological devices as books, newspapers, magazines, movies, radio, television and the Internet are the communication channels.

Mass communication differs from interpersonal communication in that its messages must be moved over distance. This movement is achieved through the use of technological devices. Radio and television messages are transmitted electronically, while newspaper and magazine messages are reproduced on high-speed presses and distributed through the mails or via carriers. Today, however, print-media messages are also transmitted electronically and wire services send news via satellite.

The receiver (sometimes called the destination, audience or decoder) in the communication process is the person with whom the message is intended to be shared. Without a receiver, there is no communication. In fact, if anyone of the above four communication components is missing, there is no communication. To properly share your message, you also must be sure that the receiver is listening and understanding what it is you have to communicate. Just because a story is carried in a newspaper or broadcast over radio or television does not mean that everyone has received the message. If some people do not read the story or pay attention to the broadcast, it has not been communicated to them. The receiver in mass communication is usually a large audience that is often referred to as the masses. Because of the audience's size and diversity, mass communication requires careful choice of symbols that will elicit correct interpretations among receivers, who each has a different frame of reference.

Feedback: If the receiver or audience in the communication process transmits back to the source an observable response to the message, you have an added component called feedback. Feedback provides the source with an opportunity to determine if the message was correctly understood and, if it wasn't, with an opportunity to modify it. Feedback can take many forms. It can consist of words, gestures, facial expressions or any other observable act.

Feedback is absent or at least very much delayed in mass communication, which makes it much more difficult than face-to-face communication. Messages in mass communication must be clearly constructed because there is seldom a chance to restate their meaning. It is true that if a newspaper story is erroneously interpreted, people will write letters to the editor; and if a broadcaster's statement is incorrectly perceived, the station may get telephone calls. However, this feedback comes too late to do much good.